

THE CURRENT STATE OF AFRICAN STUDIES IN
THE SOVIET UNION*

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LENIN'S THEORY OF THE NATIONAL-LIBERATION
REVOLUTIONS AND AFRICAN STUDIES IN THE
USSR

Ten years ago the African continent came into the limelight. 1960 has become known as "the year of Africa". The family of 10 Independent African states was joined by 17 new members. Africa began firmly to march along the road of political independence. And now its voice is distinctly heard in the international arena.

All over the world a keen interest has arisen in the events in Africa and in the causes of those events. In many countries numerous African research centres have been established which deal with the history, culture and economy of the African peoples. The Soviet Union is not an exception in this respect.

But before telling you about the particular work of Soviet scholars in the field of African Studies, I would like to make some preliminary remarks about the character of research work in social studies in general. It is believed by certain circles of western research workers and intellectuals that social studies have nothing to do with politics. They consider the main and only task of any scholar to be that of gathering facts about certain events or phenomena and making them known to a wider public. Of course, there is some truth in this view, but it is not the whole truth. It is only one aspect of the problem. Another aspect is the need to examine and evaluate the causes and effects of the

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phenomena and the facts, which have been revealed. But such an estimation very often leads to politics, or at least can be used as an argument in politics. Here is one example. After British troops had seized Benin at the end of the last century, masterpieces of Benin bronze castings appeared in the museums of European capitals. The quality of the castings showed that the society of the Benin State had reached a very high stage of development. This fact undermined the entire concept created under the influence of colonial policy, that Africans were backward peoples who needed the protection, leadership and the help of Europeans - the concept, which consciously or unconsciously, justified colonialism. So some European scholars of African culture assumed that the origin of the Benin castings was not indigenous, but probably European or Asian. And so the conclusion was drawn that external, (by which they meant colonial) contacts were vital for the African peoples and that colonialism was good for them.

The standpoint of the Soviet sociologists is that the results of their studies not only can, but should be used as political arguments in the interests of the peoples of developing countries - and the peoples of Africa in particular, i.e. to serve the aims of national liberation revolutions in Africa and other parts of the world.

The general Marxist theory of national liberation revolutions was worked out by V.I. Lenin, whose birth centenary has been celebrated this April. In summary this theory follows. The characteristic feature of the present day is the struggle between world capitalism and world socialism. The national liberation movement plays a prominent role in this struggle on the side of socialism. It fights against colonialism and neocolonialism, which are part and parcel of imperialism. Both the national liberation movement and world socialism have a common enemy - world capitalism. So they are allies, though some political leaders may not have realised it. Any success or any defeat of any ally is reflected in the development of their common struggle. From this fact there derives one of the main principles of the

foreign policy of the socialist states: to give the utmost help to the peoples fighting for their political freedom and economic independence.

The first programme of the Communist Party of our country, adopted by its 2nd Congress in 1903, included the right of nations to self-determination. This provision later became a fundamental principle of policy of the CPSU and the Soviet Government.

In many of his works Vladimir Lenin dwelt upon the question of national liberation revolutions. In his articles "The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Right of Nations to Self-determination", "The End of the War of Italy with Turkey", "A Question of Peace", "A Military Programme of Proletarian Revolution" and others, Lenin stigmatized the atrocities of imperialism in Africa and insisted, that socialists in the countries which possessed colonies should demand from their respective governments the right of colonies to self-determination. He demonstrated the possibility and inevitability of national wars by the oppressed peoples of Europe, Africa and Asia against imperialism.

Lenin wrote in May 1917 that Great Britain should immediately and unconditionally give up not only all the lands it had seized after the beginning of the war, but also its colonies. Great Britain as well as Russia and Germany should immediately withdraw their troops from all the lands captured by them granting every peoples the right to decide by free vote if they wished to live in a separate state or in a federal state with whomsoever they liked. For the first time in history the Great October Socialist Revolution eliminated colonial rule in vast territories of Kazakhstan and Central Asia having liberated from oppression over 60 million non-Russian people. The Soviet State renounced all inequitable treaties imposed on the peoples of the Orient by the Tsarist government and established new relations with them on the basis of equality. By such a policy the Soviet Union dealt a crushing blow to the foundations of imperialism and colonialism throughout the world,

including Africa.

The development of the peoples of the former Tsarist Russia, after the October Revolution - their achievements in science, culture and economy - have shown what enormous potential colonial people have and that this potential can be fully realised only in the climate of political freedom. The experience of the peoples of former Tsarist Russia provided the scholars of African and Asian affairs with rich material for study and comparison.

The African Studies in the USSR have gone through several stages, which reflect the periods of political development of the African peoples.

The first stage coincides with the period when the peoples of Africa were under colonial rule and were struggling for their political independence. At that time Soviet scientists considered their primary aims to be those of criticising theories which approved colonialism and exposing colonialism, showing its inhumanitarian essence. The main object of their attacks was the theory that the African peoples were static in history. This theory to date has many supporters in the West. The well-known English scholar of African problems, Margery Perham, wrote in 1951: "Until the very recent penetration by Europe the greater part of the continent was without the wheel, the plough or the transport animal; almost without stone houses or clothes, except for skins; without writing and so without history". (Quoted from the American Journal, Foreign Affairs, XXIX, 1951, M 7, p.638).

Such was the generally recognised thesis of bourgeois historiography. There were, of course, scholars who tried to tell the truth about the past of the African peoples, but their view was drowned in the turbid stream of racist ideas.

The information about the African peoples gained by earlier European travellers and published in the pre-

colonial period, however, ran counter to the idea which asserted the inferiority of the African peoples. The discrepancy between such assertions and the facts had to be explained somehow.

So alongside the concept that African peoples were backward and static in history the so-called Hamitic theory appeared. According to this theory, the Hamites are the African Aryans, who came from Asia and conquered the uncultured and passive aborigines of Africa. All the cultural treasures of which the African peoples can boast were allegedly created under the influence of the Hamites.

The Soviet scholars subjected those theories to severe criticism. The founders of the Soviet African Studies, Professor Potekhin and Academician Olderogge, showed in the work, "Peoples of Africa", and other books and articles, that neither of those theories were proven by facts and that both of the theories were merely justifications of colonialism. At the same time, in the work dealing with the history of Benin, Zimbabwe and the Zulus they brought into the limelight the names of such national African heroes as Samory, Behanzin, Dingaan, Lobengula and others.

Many works by Soviet authors criticise colonialism, for example "West Africa under the French Yoke (1945-1959)", by N. Gavrilov, "Imperialist Exploitation of British Colonies in Africa", by L. Goucharov, a collective monography "The Imperialist Struggle for Africa", and many others.

After the ruin of the colonial system in Africa the African peoples faced new problems. Now they seek to gain economic independence from the former colonial powers. This is a great task which requires changes in the economic and social struggle of the society. It requires a choice: which road to take - the capitalist or the non-capitalist.

In view of this, changes took place in African Studies in the Soviet Union. Now more attention is

paid to the studies of the ways of development of African countries and to the studies of their social, economic and cultural problems.

Before 1959 there were separate sections and departments in the research and educational institutions in the Soviet Union, which dealt with particular problems of African Studies. Late in 1959 the Africa Institute was set up within the system of the Academy of Science. It was headed by a prominent scholar, Professor Potekhin. During the first years of its existence the Africa Institute was mainly engaged in the studies of history, anthropology and culture. At that time the staff of the Institute published a 2 volume encyclopedia "Africa", "Modern History of Africa", "Problems of Agriculture and Peasantry in the Countries of Tropical Africa" and others. At the same time research workers were trained in the fields of economic, social and political studies.

Later the Africa Institute concentrated on these studies, as well as on research work into the problems arising from the development of ties between the USSR and African countries, and the foreign policy of African states in general.

Besides the Africa Institute, African studies are going on in other research centres and higher educational establishments in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and Tashkent. In 1966 the Scientific Council on African problems, within the Academy of Science, was set up to coordinate the work of these centres.

The staff of the Africa Institute and other centres of African studies in the USSR have produced many works on modern Africa. Some of them are the "Economy of the African Countries", "Independent Countries of Africa", "Africa in World Economics and Politics", "The Non-capitalist way of Development in the African Countries", "History of Africa in XIX - early XX Centuries", and others.

The Soviet Africanists have worked out concepts, which explain the history of the African peoples, parti-

culars of their culture, moving forces and the character of anti-imperialist revolutions in Africa and other problematic issues.

The Soviet Africanists, as well as Marxist Africanists in Western countries, point out two main reasons for the success of the national liberation revolutions of the African peoples. They are their own efforts and the change in the balance of power in the world, determined by the October Revolution in Russia and the emergence of the World Socialist System. They have shown that the national liberation movement, as Vladimir Lenin predicted, would not stop after the gaining of independence, but will go further and will assume the form of radical social change and anti-capitalist revolution. As this is consolidated in Africa, so the struggle between progressive and reactionary forces sharpens. Now African society is entering the period of class disintegration, the period of political and class struggle.

Soviet specialists in African studies are of the opinion that the content of the second stage of the anti-imperialist revolution is the replacement of the economic dominance of the imperialist powers by new relations based on equality. These new relations will provide rapid economic growth and independence from imperialism. In their analysis of the policy of neo-colonialism which consists of giving way to the pressure for political independence (which is inevitable), and at the same time of trying to make a fiction of the sovereignty of the emerging states. Neo-colonialism seeks to dominate the economy of new states and to tie them to political and military alliances with the imperialist powers. It should be admitted that in certain African countries the policy of neo-colonialism has been partially successful and now the policy of these states is to some extent influenced from the outside.

Methods of neo-colonialism are numerous, they include unequal exchange, inequitable treaties, military and economic alliances, the imposition of puppet

regimes, killing of popular leaders, political pressure, stirring up national and tribal rivalries, and threats of the so-called "communist menace". This policy is aimed at the maintenance and strengthening of capitalism as a dominant method of production in African countries.

Soviet Africanists are of the opinion that it is for the African peoples to decide which way of development (capitalist or non-capitalist) to choose. But due to the peculiarity of the conditions, under which capitalism is making its first steps in Africa, it has little hope of a long existence.

The capitalism emerging in Africa, unlike that in the West some centuries ago, does not enjoy the confidence of people now. The image of capitalism in their minds is often connected with the rule of foreign monopolies. Many African peoples have suffered too much to wish to impose on themselves the same yoke albeit of national origin. This fact will not be insignificant when the energy of the African peoples is turned to the social reconstruction of their life.

Domination by foreign monopolies created the problem of the outflow of capital from developing countries. It handicaps the modernisation of national industry and agriculture. As a result, the conflict between foreign companies and the peoples of independent states is growing. That leads to the nationalisation of foreign property.

The test of capitalism as a social system in new African states is taking place now that the world socialist system exists. The experience, the achievements of this system in economy and culture come to the notice of the African peoples and are taken into consideration by them.

These facts did not exist at the time of the upsurge of capitalism in the West. But now they do, and they affect the sympathies of people and can determine their choice. In these circumstances the Soviet Africanists have seen their task as that of demonstrating

tendencies in the social and economic development of the African countries, of gathering and analysing facts, which influence the choice. Special attention is paid to the prospects for socialism through the non-capitalist way of development. Within this general direction of research work economic problems are of high priority.

One of the main aspects of the economic policy of the African states is the planning of the national economy. Planning bodies face many problems dealing with the search for better methods of planning. I mean the size and distribution of investments, the choice of new projects, employment and others. Soviet economists try to reveal the roots and nature of the difficulties of planning in Africa, as well as the achievements in this field.

Economic cooperation between the Soviet Union and the African states is developing more and more year by year. I have mentioned above that the strengthening of the national liberation revolution is in the mutual interest both of the peoples of the so-called "third world" and the world socialist system. Therefore socialist countries do not seek any advantages for themselves at the expense of their African counterparts. On the contrary they consider their international duty to be that of helping these countries. Cooperation between socialist and developing countries contributes to the solution of many of the problems of the African states, to the reduction of their dependence on former colonial powers and to their economic independence. Soviet Africanists deal with these problems and put forward suggestions aimed at producing more efficient cooperation.

In the course of building up a national economy in Africa two trends appear more and more distinctly. The first one leads to the removal of relations inherited from the past. It leads to the reduction of the influence of social strata, interested in these resolutions. On the international level this trend leads to the establishment and strengthening of relations with socialist countries. In practice it assumes the form of the emergence

of "socialist orientated" states.

The other trend leads to the reconciliation with foreign capital and the preservation of social relations based on private property.

Both of these trends are backed by certain social layers and which one will prevail depends on the outcome of the class struggle.

The position of class forces in African society is presently not yet clear. Relationships between industrial workers, the peasantry, the bourgeoisie and intellectuals are very complicated. Soviet Africanists study the transition of African society, the peculiarities and common features of the class struggle, as well as the struggle of ideologies in Africa. In this respect they pay great attention to socialist doctrines, of which there are many. Most of them claim to be national. The criterion of the real meaning of any doctrine is its class character. We ask: "Whose interests are served by its implementation?" This test allows us to see whether a so-called socialist doctrine, or a party, or a regime is really socialist. This test helps us to understand the reasons for dramatic changes in the social politics of some new African states.

Soviet Africanists study the foreign policy of the African states. As is known many of these countries adhere to the concept of neutralism, which includes non-alignment, the windup of foreign military bases, the declaration of Africa as a nuclear free zone and the maintenance of peace. It is now possible to subject the experience of the African countries in this field to a thorough examination and to clarify the aims of, and reasons for, the policy of neutralism. It is possible also to pick out the character of the tendencies towards economic and political integration and cooperation.

Soviet Africanists also study the policy of the Western powers towards the African countries: their aims and methods. Special attention is paid to what

can be classified as attempts to undermine the unity of the African states and to divide Africa into zones of influence.

There are two main aims in the Soviet Africanists' study of Soviet foreign policy in Africa: first, to contribute to more beneficial, mutual cooperation between the Soviet Union and the African states and second, to wipe out misconceptions of Soviet policy towards the African states.

And now let me say more about Soviet research in the historical field. As I have already mentioned the Soviet historians consider their task to be that of re-establishing the truth about the African peoples' past, exposing the myth, that before colonisation, the African peoples were without history. At the same time they subject to scientific analysis the theory, backed by some African scientists and public figures, that the African countries had their own special way of historical development, entirely different from that of other countries of the world. And they find this theory does not agree with the facts. They are convinced that historical process in Africa follows the same laws as in other countries.

Much attention is paid to the history of colonial enslavement and the anti-colonial resistance of the African peoples, to the development of the national liberation movement as a part of the world revolutionary process and to the influence of the world Communist and Labour Movements on the African revolution. The Africa Institute has started to make a detailed study of the history of the national liberation struggle in Africa with a view to publishing a comprehensive work on the subject.

Soviet Africanists deal with the development of African culture and its contribution to world civilization. They try to suggest ways of eliminating the cultural aftermath of the colonial period in the new states of Africa. Drawing upon the experience of the

Soviet Union with regard to similar problems encountered after the revolution there, they are concerned with the problem of inventing alphabets suited to certain African languages, the organisation of the educational and research systems, as well as with studying modern African languages.

The geography, anthropology, politics and economics of individual African countries are also under study in the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Africanists maintain and strengthen their ties with their colleagues in Africa. In recent years the Africa Institute has been visited by research workers from Mali, the United Arab Republic, Guinea, the Somali Republic, Uganda and other countries. Of course scientists from Ghana were also made welcome. Each year according to the UN programme, the Institute organizes seminars on finance and economic development for specialists from African countries. Soviet research workers took an active part in the second session of the International Congress of Africanists in Dakar (in December, 1967).

In conclusion I would like to say a few words about publications on Africa in the Soviet Union. There is a monthly journal, called "International Affairs" which is published both in Russian and English. The weekly "New Times" is published in Russian and English too. The monthly "World Economy and International Relations" and "Peoples of Asia and Africa", are published only in Russian, but summaries in English and other foreign languages are provided. There are other publications on African affairs, which come out only in Russian, among them "Asia and Africa Today". In the near future a monthly magazine devoted exclusively to African affairs is to be started in Russian, English and French. Some works of Soviet Africanists have been translated into English. In 1962 the Africa Institute started publishing a quarterly "List of books and articles on African Affairs, released in the USSR". These "Lists" come out in Russian, English and French,



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